

Blue Ribbon Commission on Transportation Administration Committee

Final Meeting Summary

March 24, 2000

Adopted April 28, 2000

Present: Doug Hurley, Chair, Peter Bennett, Vice Chair, Representative Ruth Fisher, Robert Higgins, Senator Jim Horn, Tomio Moriguchi, Connie Niva, Judie Stanton

Absent: Greg Devereux, Bob Dilger, Randy Scott, Ken Smith

Speakers: Scott Boettcher (Washington Permit Assistance Center), Greg Kipp (King County Department of Development and Environmental Services), Joyce Olson (Community Transit), Ken Stone (Washington State Department of Transportation), Tricia Thomson (American Public Works Association/City of Bellevue)

Others in Attendance: Roger Bergh (Washington State Good Roads and Transportation Association), Jerry Hendricks (Transportation Improvement Board), Charlie Howard (Washington State Department of Transportation), Jack Locke (City of Auburn), Mary McCumber (Puget Sound Regional Council), Chris Mudgett (County Road Administration Board), Tracy Ownbey (Community Transit), Chris Rose (Washington State Transportation Commission), Karen Schmidt (Freight Mobility Strategic Investment Board), Jim Seitz (Association of Washington Cities), Charlie Shell (City of Seattle), Gretchen White (Washington State Department of Transportation)

The Committee Chair called the meeting to order at 9:05 a.m. He asked for any proposed revisions to the summary of the February 24th meeting. Judie Stanton noted that in the discussion of gas taxes on page 3, “a 67 percent gas tax increase” should be changed to “a 67 cent gas tax increase.” The Committee agreed and approved the summary of the February 24th meeting with one revision.

The Chair noted that one topic the Committee will need to address in the future is the dilemma between sustaining the integrity of the statewide transportation system and keeping people in various jurisdictions feeling fairly treated. He briefly summarized the Committee’s previous discussion regarding the extent to which the Puget Sound region sends money out of the area to help make the rest of the state work. He commented on the rising tide of concern in the Puget Sound region about a recent figure stating that 49 percent of its revenues are being exported. He also reminded the Committee that if citizens in the Puget Sound region did receive a “fair share return,” many services in rural parts of Washington State, including transportation systems and schools, would be left underfunded.

The Chair explained that the April 28th meeting will be dedicated exclusively to the discussion of options packages. The chair emphasized the word “options,” reminding the Committee that their current objective is not to make specific recommendations but to develop an array of options to generate discussion.

The Chair also noted that Robert Higgins has replaced Patricia Notter on the Administration Committee.

Permit Reform Options

The Chair reported on a conversation he had with Aaron Ostrom of 1000 Friends of Washington and Peter Hurley of the Commission’s Investment Strategies Committee on the issue of permit reform. A concern of the environmental community is that each permit exists for a reason – it expresses a societal value to protect the environment. When considering ways to improve the permitting process, the Committee should not sacrifice the effectiveness of the permits in protecting the environment.

Ken Stone of the Washington State Department of Transportation presented a description of the types of permits required for state transportation projects and described a sample timeline for environmental documentation at WSDOT. A master list of all permits and approvals that could be required for a given transportation project was distributed to the Committee to convey the scope and variety of permits that could be required for a single transportation project. A list stating the percentage of WSDOT projects requiring certain permits was also distributed. Special attention was given to Section 404 wetlands permits and Environmental Impact Studies. While only 1 percent of WSDOT projects require Section 404 permits, the time required to obtain the permit averages 2 years. Environmental Impact Studies were identified as the most time-consuming part of the permitting process. Stone told the Committee that for an average small project (e.g., a freeway interchange) the total elapsed time for environmental documentation is 2.25 years. For a larger project requiring individual 404 permits rather than more easily processed nationwide 404 permits, the total elapsed time for environmental documentation is 4 years. Both estimates are for “best case” scenarios.

The Committee identified and discussed many issues that contribute to the lengthiness of the current environmental documentation process, including the following considerations:

- Laws and regulations can change at any time during the process, which can potentially cause delays or necessitate redesign of the project.
- In some projects before the application process can begin, a separate phase exists in which the types of permits required are determined.
- In some cases, there is substantive coverage of the same topic at multiple levels of government. The Committee discussed the possibility of streamlining in such cases. The Legislature is currently making efforts to simplify wetlands impacts studies with House Bill 3076, the Certification Acceptance Bill. Also, the Federal Highway Administration is making headway in streamlining of permits with its Memorandum of Understanding with federal resource agencies.

- The Chair noted that in addition to a lack of clarity on how to handle permit requests, many federal agencies lack sufficient resources for the actual completion of work and consequently have large backlogs of permit requests.
- The Chair also pointed out that permitting issues that have been reviewed and resolved at a particular agency or hearing can resurface at subsequent review levels. Accordingly, even when an apparent agreement has been reached on an issue, it can be reopened and reconsidered later in the permitting process.

Tricia Thompson of the American Public Works Association and the City of Bellevue presented a timeline for a typical transportation project in the City of Bellevue as well as APWA's recommendations for improving government efficiency through permit assistance centers. APWA held two workshops in Fall 1998 and Spring 1999 to evaluate methods for improving overall project implementation. Permitting was at the top as a key component for improving project delivery. In 1995, the Legislature created a permitting center in Lacey, which provides consultation on permit requirements, coordinates the permit process for more complex projects, and provides permit "liaisons" assigned to manage multiple permits.

At its board meeting in June 1999, AWPWA voted to recommend the establishment of centers throughout the state that include federal, state, and local permitting requirements under one roof. The organization believes there is a need for at least 8 centers, with 3 to 4 in the Puget Sound region and others spread across the state. The primary role of the centers would include the following activities: process permits in parallel by including federal, state, and local officials in the same space; conduct pre-application meetings and develop critical path charts for completing permits on time; be available throughout project duration for troubleshooting sessions; and host educational workshops for developers, project managers, and others. Cost recovery through charging clients a fee to help offset the cost of centers is critical to this effort.

Should permit centers not prove feasible, AWPWA recommends that at a minimum, local governments should be empowered to have "CA" (certified agency) status to make final decisions on permits. Another option is to create teams of representatives from each agency to work on a project and see it through together. The result of these efforts would be reduced timelines, which translates to lower costs, and improved quality of transportation projects.

The Chair noted that right-of-way acquisition timing and costs are additional areas that the Committee should investigate.

Scott Boettcher, Director of the Washington Permit Assistance Center at the Washington State Department of Ecology, described the nature and work of the Permit Assistance Center and presented permit reform options for the Committee to consider. First, he recommended making greater use of multi-agency pre-application meetings. The benefits of bringing applicants and their consultants together with local, state, and federal regulators at the earliest project stages should not be underestimated. Second, he suggested assembling permit decision-making teams and designating permit coordinators. On a project-level basis, establishing multi-agency permit decision-making teams with a single permit coordinator can be an effective way to ensure that permit decision-making progresses in a straightforward, predictable manner, without significant interruption. Third, he recommended co-locating regulatory personnel. Creating opportunities

for regulatory agencies to co-locate personnel in regional or satellite offices (even on a part-time basis) allows enhanced efficiencies over being located in separate offices; including improvements in information availability and project familiarity. Fourth, he suggested making greater use of the Internet. Today's technology has tremendous potential to aid the permit decision-making process. Using the Internet to share information among regulators, applicants, consultants, and the public creates an opportunity to facilitate and foster a more informed set of stakeholders.

The Committee discussed the importance of involving environmental documentation agencies early in the timeline of transportation projects. By obtaining input regarding permits as initial design and planning occurs, future hurdles, such as redesigning and retrofitting, could be avoided. Concern was raised as to whether or not involving more agencies throughout the project would increase costs, the complexity of the project, or both. In contrast, others thought that because of significant savings in time (and thus money), identifying permitting concerns early in a project would produce net benefits.

The Committee also noted that while the state can institute programs such as Permit Assistance Centers that help speed the permitting process, the underlying statutes and regulations in these permit programs remain unchanged. Members recognized that it will be difficult to achieve substantial improvements in timelines without significant changes in statutes and regulations.

Greg Kipp of the King County Department of Development and Environmental Services described a group of programs between DDES and the Washington State Department of Transportation that have resulted in a better understanding of needs in transportation projects through the involvement of DDES in actual project design. Kipp made three suggestions to the Committee. First, he recommended achieving consistencies in regulation. Second, he called for integrating the permit process into the design process. The nature of the two processes is relatively similar, and they are dependent on one another. Third, he suggested giving agencies the option to delegate authority. Delegation can occur in three directions: sideways, downwards, and upwards. In some projects DDES defers to other jurisdictions to make assessments and decisions; in other cases state agencies delegate authority to local jurisdictions where they have sufficient expertise. It was noted that obstacles to delegation include disagreements among interested parties over standards and cases in which parties are overly protective of their "turf."

Efficiencies in Project Delivery and Operation and Maintenance

Joyce Olson of Community Transit made a presentation on the practical application of some efficiency tools in her organization. Between 1994 and 1998, the cost per passenger mile at Community Transit decreased 23 percent, and the cost per hour of service decreased almost 18 percent. Maintenance costs per revenue hour decreased 27 percent, from \$26.53 to \$19.42, and maintenance costs per revenue mile decreased 36 percent, from \$1.17 to \$0.76. Olson attributed maintenance cost savings to many reforms, including an improved uniform vendor contract, bringing certain maintenance functions in-house, and the standardization and modernization of Community Transit's fleet.

Other ways Community Transit has cut costs and generated revenue include bringing training programs in-house, using a cost-conscious process to select health coverage plans, establishing a self-insured worker's compensation program, contracting the operations of the commuter service to a private provider, using the design-build method for capital projects, attracting private sponsors like Boeing for marketing programs, and advertising on buses and vans.

The Committee talked at length about increased efficiencies in Community Transit's DART Dial-a-Ride Transportation service for citizens with disabilities and its vanpool service. DART is very expensive, with a boarding cost of \$23.54, four times higher than regular bus service. Community Transit contracts this service to a private provider. To address excess demand for DART, Community Transit created a travel training program. Many DART customers could use the fixed-route bus service but did not know how to do so. The training program saved a significant amount of money and helped citizens with disabilities achieve greater independence. Additionally, Community Transit trimmed "deadhead" time (the time that a bus travels from its base to the route area) by identifying new locations where DART coaches could be stored.

The vanpool program is Community Transit's least expensive and most flexible service. It has no labor costs, and the vans use gasoline instead of diesel fuel. The program's main constraint is the capital cost of vans.

The Committee briefly discussed using public transit as a means to transport students to and from school rather than using school buses, which sit unused for a large portion of the day. The potential problems with this option are the difficulty of handling two overlapping peak periods of the regular rush hour as well as before and after school. Also, there is a safety concern that students could be subjected to less than desirable bus riders or situations.

In addition, the Committee briefly discussed the consolidation of transit agencies in the same area, such as city transit systems in the middle of county transit systems. Consolidation could provide savings by eliminating duplicate services. Potential problems would be if the agencies have different missions as well as if money is not identified correctly and distributed fairly.

Public Comments

During the public comment period, Charlie Howard of the Washington State Department of Transportation gave the Committee a progress report on the resolution of an issue regarding highway construction costs involving a discrepancy between WSDOT's figures and those that Bill Eager of TDA, Inc., presented at the Committee meeting on December 10, 1999.

Next Meeting

The next Committee meeting is scheduled for **Friday, April 28, 2000, 9:00 a.m.–12:00 p.m.**, in the SeaTac Room at the SeaTac Holiday Inn.

The Committee Chair adjourned the meeting at 12:00 p.m.